

Notes From
A Cowboy's Diary

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In the spring and early summer of 1876 I was a cowboy in Eastern Colorado. I worked for the cattle firm of Moore & Powers twenty miles east of Las Animas. On the north bank of the Arkansas River stood the ruins of old Fort Wise. This fort was named after Governor Wise of Virginia. During the Civil War my father-in-law, Judge Lawrence Dudley Bailey, Justice of the Supreme Court of Kansas, paid a visit to Major General David Hunter, commanding the Department of the Missouri at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. When Judge Bailey entered General Hunter's headquarters, General Hunter said, "Well, Judge, how is old Breckinridge County?" Judge Bailey replied, "General Hunter, there is no Breckinridge County. I put an act through the Kansas Legislature changing the name of Breckinridge to Lyon County, Kansas. We do not propose to perpetuate the names of traitors in our State." Without a word General Hunter turned to his desk and wrote the following: "General Order Number The name of Fort Wise, Colorado, is hereby changed to the name of Fort Lyon. We do not propose to perpetuate the names of traitors in this country" As is well known, General Lyon was killed in the battle of Wilson Creek in the Civil War. Now I will proceed with my cowboy story.

Immediately below Fort Wise was Bent's old fort. It stood on a high, rock promontory fifty or sixty feet above the Arkansas River and was built of sandstone with a dirt roof and in the form of a hollow square, covering a half acre of ground. An enormous deep ditch faced by a high stone wall encircled the fort and inclosed about five acres of ground. In the days when the Indians were on the war path the great gate in this wall was on hinges so that it could be let down across this great ditch to form a bridge. When I lived in this old fort the gate was permanently down; but the two great posts with pulleys at the top of each, the great chain used to lower the gate, and the two enormous cast-iron weights used to balance the gate when it was lowered as a bridge, were still there.

In the days when this old fort was one of Colonel

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Bent's Indian trading posts, small field pieces were mounted on the dirt roof of the fort behind low walls that were some three feet higher than the roof.

There was a well in the plaza of the fort that furnished plenty of water; but a road had been cut out of the stone bluff down to the river where live stock could be taken for water. I lived alone in this old fort for about three months, inspecting the cattle on the range every day, and engaging in round-ups and cattle drives.

Soon after the Civil War a great flood came and an ice jam formed at Bent's old fort, so that old Fort Wise was flooded many feet deep and the soldiers were forced to leave the fort. Immediately after this the fort was abandoned and moved to the north side of the Arkansas River opposite Las Animas, Colorado.

While I was there in the spring of '76, Second Lieutenant Homer W. Wheeler of the Sixth Cavalry was sent to old Fort Wise with a detail of soldiers and camped there for some two weeks. This detail of soldiers took up the bodies of all dead soldiers buried at Fort Wise and placed them in wooden boxes. These bodies were hauled by wagon to Kit Carson, Colorado, and from there shipped to Fort Leavenworth for permanent interment. While Lieutenant Wheeler was there I visited with him daily. Sometimes he would take supper with me at Bent's old fort, and at other times I would eat with him in his tent at Fort Wise. I learned that Lieutenant Wheeler was a nephew of General Carmi W. Babcock, of Lawrence, Kansas. I also learned that he served as the guide to Lieutenant Hanley and a troop of cavalry in April 1875 and participated in the battle of Sapulpa Creek in Northwestern Kansas with the Indians. In this battle Lieutenant Wheeler killed an Indian Chief who was just on the point of shooting a soldier, thus just saving the soldier's life. For his heroism he was appointed Second Lieutenant in the United States Cavalry and was on duty with the Sixth Cavalry only six months when I met him at old Fort Wise.

Opposite Bent's old fort was Miller's Island, a mile long and a quarter of a mile wide, and covered with

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heavy timber. A man named Miller owned it and lived there in 1876. On the south side of the river was the Santa Fe Railroad and near the track was a ranch house which served as the post office for the surrounding cattle men and ranchers. About twice a week I swam my pinto cow pony across the river to get my mail. Incoming mail was thrown off on the ground in bundles. Outgoing mail was fastened to a large barrel hoop and caught on the arm of a railroad mail clerk at the mail car door as the train passed, the mail detached and the hoop thrown to the ground.

I had my share of breaking wild bronches while on this ranch. Always we took the wild horse to a large sand bar opposite old Fort Wise and there these bronchos were broken. It did not take long for they were soon worn out from bucking in the deep sand.

For some weeks I had a negro cowboy on the ranch as a helper. He had just finished five-year enlistment in the United State Cavalry and was a good rider. We called him "Peak". One day he insisted on riding the worst bucking horse we had at the ranch, a gray mare. He carelessly let the end of a rope hit the mare's heels and she began to buck furious'y. She was very near the bank of the Arkansas River and finally the saddle girths broke and saddle and negro were catapulted over the mare's head into the Arkansas River, ten feet deep. But "Peak" was a good swimmer and holding on to the saddle with one hand he swam to a sand bar and got out. I was able to lasso another cow pony near by and so "Peak" was soon mounted again.

One day we had a big round-up on the south side of the Arkansas River opposite old Fort Wise. I was "cutting out" for I was riding a very fine cut-out pony. A trained cut out pony will follow a cow like a dog, and drive her out of the herd without any direction from the rider. My ranch boss, Abe Peterson, was also "cutting out" when suddenly his pony turned quickly to follow a cow, and Abe fell off his pony. This pony immediately galloped away to the south toward the sand hills. I pursued the running pony, but was not able to get near enough

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to throw my lasso until I had chased him nearly a mile into the sand hills and almost back to the round up, when I got near enough to throw my rope. It was perfect cast and the noose dropped over the running pony's head very beautifully. I never stopped the gallop, but led the captured pony back to the round-up. The cowboys cheered me for my expert work and I was nicknamed "Lasso Bill". This name stuck to me as long as I was in the cattle country in Colorado.

One day I was driving a herd of range cattle toward the ranch house, when suddenly a cow dodged out of the herd and ran toward the hills. I followed her and tried to drive her back. I did not know at the time that she had a young calf concealed in the grass in the hills, or I would not have tried to compel her to rejoin the herd. The cow suddenly become enraged and quickly turned and charged, and before my pony could get out of the way she drove one of her sharp, slender horns through its breast causing its death within a few minutes. I drew my revolver, intending to shoot the cow, but she walked quietly away. I had to carry my heavy cowboy saddle about three miles before I found a bunch of cow ponies grazing and was able to catch one of them by offering it lumps of sugar. I rode to the ranch a very tired cowboy.

I was in prairie dog country and often saw prairie owls, rattlesnakes, and rabbits, all running into the same prairie dog hole. This story has often been denied, but I vouch for the truth of it.

Soon after taking charge of Bent's old fort I picked six good milk cows out of the herd of range cattle and drove them into the corral inside of the fort and milked them twice a day. I had to rope these cows every time I milked them, snub their heads close to a post, and then tie their hind legs together, before they would submit to being milked. I made butter and sold the extra butter, milk and buttermilk, also eggs, to passing immigrants, for the trail passed close to Bent's fort and near the trail I put out a sign, "Butter, Buttermilk, Milk and Eggs For Sale." I had a flock of chickens at the ranch and they furnished me several dozen eggs a day. When Lieutenant Wheeler

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was camped at Fort Wise, only one-half mile from Bent's fort, he was one of my best customers for these food supplies, not only for himself but for his men. My income from these sales largely supplemented my salary. In fact, this source of income was larger than my salary.

William Bent Moore, son of my employer, often visited me at the ranch and assisted me with the cattle on the range. One day his mother came to the ranch in a closed hack with a Mexican driver. She remained to help set the dinner that I had prepared. She was an educated woman and spoke perfect English, though her mother was a full blood Cheyenne Indian, while her father was Colonel Bent, former owner of Bent's old fort.

Six years later William Bent Moore entered the University of Kansas and we were classmates there and belonged to the same dancing club, "The Gradatim Club", which was organized by the late Lieutenant-Governor William Y. Morgan, of Hutchinson, Kansas. While here in the University, I held many "campfires" with William Bent Moore over our cowboy days on the range. Soon after leaving the University and returning to his home in Old Town Las Animas, he was run over by a switch engine in the railroad yards and instantly killed. He was one-quarter Cheyenne and a very handsome man. His two sisters, younger than William, were said to be the most beautiful women in the state of Colorado.

In my performance of my duties on the range in the neighborhood of the ranch, I rode horse back from fifteen to thirty miles per day; but one day I rode eighty miles, using four horses. The last twenty miles I rode from the ranch in company with William Bent Moore to his home at Old Town Las Animas, where I stayed all night.

Before daylight the next morning I left Old Town Las Animas in company with Judge Moore in a buggy drawn by two very fast trotting horses, for Trinidad, Colorado, a distance of one hundred miles. We arrived at our destination just as it was getting dark. Judge Moore had a large sum of money in the buggy and he took me along to help him guard it. We were armed with rifles and re-

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volvers, but we were not disturbed on our journey. We remained in Trinidad all night and started back the next day, but we traveled slowly and it took us two days to get back to Old Town Las Animas.

After the round-up season was over I was assigned, with other cowboys, to guard a large beef herd on reserve pastures on the north side of the Arkansas River, a few miles above Bent's old fort. One night I was on duty, with three other cowboys, holding the cattle. It was after midnight and most of the cattle were lying down, when suddenly a great storm came up from the northwest, with wind, rain and hail. I was on the south side of the herd near the river when the storm broke. Instantly this great herd of cattle stampeded and as is always the case, they ran before the storm. My only chance of escape was to plunge my horse into the Arkansas River and swim across; but before I got across the herd was upon me and on both sides. As soon as I struck dry ground, I raced my horse to the south as fast as any horse could run, finding my way by the flashes of lightning. I ran up a gulch, a tributary to the Arkansas, with the great herd thundering in pursuit, but a flash of lightning showed me a ledge of rock and I dodged in behind it and there waited. The great herd rushed past, but I was protected by the rock and thus probably saved my life.

Those were the days of open ranges and real cowboys, but now those days are gone, never to return, and the cowboy of today has become only a fence rider.



